THE LAKE OF THE MOUNTAIN SPIRITS

This is the story of the geologist, Volkhov, a huge broad-shouldered man with a round Mongolian face, who made a name for himself as an explorer of the more inaccessible parts of Siberia. His story, he said, was an interesting one, and one where the chief merit goes to good sense and sober analysis. "There is much," he said, "that stands out vividly in my memory that I probably can't convey to you but I hope that you'll get some idea of my work in Siberia.

Some years ago, I went on an excursion to investigate the Central Altai—the crest of Listvyaga and the heights on the left bank of the Katun. At that time I was prospecting for gold, and although that summer I found no auriferous sand worth anything, I was delighted with the very interesting geology and the natural beauties of the Altai. There was nothing especially striking about the place where I was working. Listvyaga is a comparatively low crest without any eternal snows, which means—none of that glittering variety of glaciers, mountain lakes, threatening peaks and other assorted mountain views which captivate one among the higher ranges. But the stern beauty of the bare rocky masses pushing up from the shaggy taiga, which surged over the round rolling hills, tossing like a dark green sea made up for the rather dull life in the broad swampy river valleys, where my work took me for the greater part of the time. I love these northern parts, with their silent grimness, their subdued, monotonous colouring—love them, it may be, especially for that primitive solitude and wildness that is their main characteristic. I would not change them for all the gaudy glamour of the south, which haunts us on the Caucasian and Crimean Rivieras, littered with cigarette ends and empty cans. And at those times when I hunger for freedom, for nature—as every explorer does when he is shut up among houses for a long time—it is pictures of grey cliffs that I see, of leaden seas, and the sombre depths of damp pine forests, cedars with their broken crowns. . . .

In addition to my main work, I had another assignment—to examine the bed of excellent asbestos along the middle reaches of the Katun, near the large village of Chemal. The shortest way there lay past the highest Katun crest on the Altai, along the valley of the upper Katun. After reaching the village of Uimon, I would have to top the Terektinsk crest—a high, snow-capped ridge—and then come out again in the Katun valley through Ongudai.

It was only here, on this part of the route, that I felt the real enchantment of the Altai. I well remember the moment, when, after trekking a long time through the thick forest of firs, cedars and deciduous trees, I descended with my pack horse caravan into the Katun valley. Here the water meadows held us up badly. The horses sank to their bellies in the thick sucking mud concealed beneath the surface vegetation. Every dozen yards cost incredible labour. But I would not halt for the night, for I had resolved that that night must see me on the right bank of the Katun River. The waxing moon soon rose over the mountains and it was easy to find our way.

The monotonous rush of a swift river greeted us as we came out on the bank. In the moonlight, the river looked very wide, but when our guide on his fearless horse entered the dark, swirling water, with the rest of us following, we found that it was only knee-deep, and we made our way easily to the opposite bank. Avoiding the wet sandy willow-grown shore, we again found ourselves in the swamp which the Siberians call karagainik. Here and there on the soft carpet of moss were poor-looking pines, and everywhere there were tall rushes with hard leaves rustling over them. To camp in such a place would mean leaving the horses all night without food, so I decided to push on. An ascent raised our hopes of finding some dry spot. Then the path dived into the velvety black depths of a spruce forest, and the horses' hoofs sank into a soft mossy carpet; it was not very cheerful, and we were sorry for the tired horses. When we had ridden for about half an hour, the forest began to thin out, we saw pines and cedars, and the moss disappeared almost entirely; the slope, however, far from lessening, became steeper, and however much we tried to keep our spirits up, this two hours' climb after all the difficulties of the day came very hard on us. So you can imagine how glad everybody was when the horses' shoes began to ring, striking sparks from stones underfoot, and we came out on top of an almost level spur, with grass for the horses and a dry spot for tents. In an instant the animals were unloaded, tents set up under a huge cedar, and after our usual tea and a pipe at the camp fire, we were soon sound asleep.

Everybody slept late in the morning, after the previous day's labours. I was awakened by the bright sunshine, and instantly went out of my tent, to find a fresh breeze tossing the dark green branches of the cedars. To the left, the light contours of four sharp white peaks seemed to be suspended in the translucent rosy light, framed by two trees. The air was marvellously clear, and the steep sides of the snow-capped tops glowed with every possible shade of rose. A little lower was the blue-humped top of a glacier with massive patches of indigo shadow, bringing out in still stronger relief the airy lightness of the upper masses which seemed to glow with

some light of their own against a sky of pure gold. I could not tear myself away from the sight of these unexpected snowy peaks. Some minutes passed, the sun rose higher, the gold took on a purple shade, the rose fled from the peaks leaving them blue, while the glacier sparkled like silver. The clappers on the horses rattled, men called to one another beneath the trees as they drove up the horses to be loaded, then rolled up the packs and bound them on, while I gazed enchanted at the magic play of light over the heavy masses. After the narrow range of vision on the taiga paths, after the grim wildness of the bare tundra hills and the heavy, gigantic masses of cliffs, this was like a new world—a transparent, shining world of changing colour.

As you see, my first love for the high Altai peaks flamed up unexpectedly and with great strength. It was a love which brought me more and more discoveries. I won't try to describe my feelings when I saw the marvellous transparence of the azure or emerald waters of a mountain lake shining with the gleam of blue ice. I'll content myself with saying that the sight of these snowy mountains gave me a keener understanding of nature's loveliness. That almost musical play of light, shade and colour were like the notes of a glorious harmony.

Avoiding the higher regions in our route, I descended again to the Katun valley, and then came out onto the Uimon steppe—a flat bottom with excellent feed for the horses—yes, and for us too, in the hospitality of the small villages scattered over it. The further Terektinsk heights gave me nothing of geological interest, as the broad flat tops were of unchanging granite. The rise on the Uimon side was impossibly steep, and cost plenty of sweat for horse and man, while the language used was sufficient to scorch the grass trod by my caravan. The black forest itself—a thick taiga of mingled cedar, spruce and fir, with tall grass to the riders' shoulders—was very difficult for my heavy packs with the artillery saddles and large cases. So you can well understand how glad I was when I came out on the flat watershed above the forest line. But here too, at the edge of eternal snows, we found a broad line of bog where we struggled and stuck until we hit on the idea of crossing it obliquely, along the border of the snowfield.

The descent to Ongudai was easier, but long and monotonous. The prolonged trek through such difficult parts had developed a strange patience in me, when the body goes through all the hardships of a difficult road, while the mind is dormant, waiting. . . .

On arriving at Ongudai, I sent my assistant with the collections and equipment through the Altai to Biisk. I could travel light to the Chemal asbestos bed. Taking only one guide and setting out with fresh horses, I soon arrived at the Katun and stopped to rest at the village of Kayancha.

Tea with fragrant honey tasted especially good, and we sat for a long time at the newly-planed table in the little garden with the young teacher who had invited me in. My guide, a silent, grim Oirot[1] sucked unconcernedly at his copper-trimmed pipe, while I questioned my kind host about everything worth seeing along the further route to Chemal. He willingly told me all that I wanted to know.

"There's another thing, Comrade Engineer," he said. "Not far from Chemal you'll find a village. There's a famous artist of ours living there—Chorosov, you've probably heard of him. He's a crusty old chap, but if he takes a fancy to you he'll show you everything, he's got no end of grand pictures."

I remembered pictures by Chorosov that I had seen in Tomsk and Biisk—particularly *The Crown of Katun* and *Khan-Altai*, and I made up my mind that come what might, I was going to visit the artist. Now I saw everything very differently, and thought of them as being amazingly true to life. What had seemed to me invented or exaggerated when seen on canvas in the cramped rooms of a picture gallery was amazingly beautiful in reality. I realized that the diminution in scale and plane, usually favourable for exact representation in motion-pictures, made it very difficult to bring these snowy peaks with such gigantic heights and masses of colours onto the screen. Chorosov had not been able to avoid this drawback either, despite his great talent. However, what he had put into his pictures was a more faithful reflection of the cold, shining spirit of the mountains than had been achieved by any other artist. To see his many pictures, and perhaps to get a sketch for myself, struck me as being an excellent conclusion to my first acquaintance with the snow-peaks of the Altai.

The path along the bank of the Katun was easy to follow, so I dismissed my guide in Kayancha, and by the middle of the next day I was mounting the low but steep rise. From its top the sun-filled even mouth of a valley opened before me, golden with ripening grain. At the edge of the forest, several new houses shone with their fresh yellow logs. In one place deciduous trees formed a promontory jutting out from the forest mass, enclosing a small open space planted with bright peonies, and there I could see a large building. Everything was exactly as the Kayancha teacher had described, and I turned my horse confidently towards the house of the artist Chorosov.

I was expecting to see a gruff old fellow, and was agreeably surprised when an agile, dried-up, clean-shaven man with swift, exact movements, came out onto the porch. When I looked more closely into his Mongolian features, however, I saw the lines on the fallen cheeks and the high, protruding forehead, and the grey at his shaggy temples and bristling whiskers. He welcomed me politely, but without any particular enthusiasm.

Over the inevitable tea I poured out my heart to the artist, or better, poured out all that had been stored up in it from my recent visit to the heights. Evidently Chorosov felt that my enthusiasm was sincere; he began to thaw and his Oirot taciturnity expanded into friendly talk.

After tea he took me to his studio, a spa-

[1] Oirots—a mongoloid people inhabiting the Altai Region.

cious unplastered room with large windows extending half the width of the house. Among the numerous studies and small pictures there was one that attracted me immediately.

Chorosov told me that this was a variant of the picture Deny-Der, or the Lake of Mountain Spirits, which was in one of the large Siberian galleries. I had heard about it, but had never seen it.

I shall describe this picture as exactly as I can, because it is very important for the proper understanding of further events. It was a small canvas—not more than a metre in width, in a simple black frame, its clear colours shining in the rays of the evening sun. The grey-blue expanse of lake filling the central part of the canvas breathed a silent, cool peace. In the foreground, by the stones on the flat shore where the green carpet of grass alternated with white patches of snow, lay the bole of a cedar. At the very roots of the fallen cedar a large blue patch of ice stretched along the shore, while smaller ones intermingled with grey boulders cast greenish and blue-grey shadows on the surface of the lake. Two short, wind-racked cedars raised their thick branches like hands stretched upward to the sky. In the background, the steep, serrated snow-covered heights, ribbed with cliffs of violet and pale yellow, rose sheer from the lake. In the centre of the picture a glacier crevasse filled with blinding snow sent a wave of blue drift to the lake, and high above it soared a triangular pyramid like a diamond, with a scarf of rosy clouds drifting at the side. On the left side of the glacier crevasse was a cone-shaped mountain, likewise almost completely wrapped in its snowy mantle. It stood on a broad base which descended in gigantic steps to the far border of the lake. . . .

The picture breathed that same remoteness and cold shining purity which had enchanted me on the way to the Katun crest. I forgot about all the other canvases and stood there, forgetful of time, gazing into the veritable heart of the Altai's snowy peaks, amazed at the subtle vision of the people who had given that lake the name of Deny-Der—the Lake of Mountain Spirits.

Chorosov watched me with contracted eyes, evidently pleased at the impression produced.

"Where did you find that lake, Grigory Ivanovich?" I asked. "Does it really exist?"

"The lake does exist. And what's more, it's much better, of course, than you see it here," Chorosov replied. "But it's no easy matter to find it. . . ."

The artist scanned me closely before he continued.

"You probably don't know the Oirot legends about that lake?"

"Oh, they ought to be interesting, if they've given it such a poetic name!"

Chorosov's eyes travelled to the picture.

"Is there nothing that you notice particularly about that picture?" he asked. "Most people don't see it. . . ."

"Yes, just here, in the left-hand corner, where there's the cone-shaped mountain," I said. "Excuse me, Grigory Ivanovich, but here the colouring struck me as being just impossible."

"But look a little closer. . . ."

I began to examine the place which had surprised me, and so fine and subtle was the artist's work, that the more I looked, the more details seemed to emerge from the picture. At the foot of the cone-shaped mountain a greenish-white cloud rose, radiating a faint light. The latticed reflection on the water of that light and the gleam of the snow gave long bands of shadow which for some reason had a rosy shade. A deeper rose lay upon the broken rocks fallen from the cliff face. And in those places where the direct rays of the sun shone over from beyond the white walls of the crest, there were elongated columns of blueish-green smoke or steam, resembling huge human figures. These amazing, unnatural colours gave that part of the landscape a threatening, fantastic character.

"I don't altogether understand that," and I pointed to the blueish-green columns.

"And don't try," laughed Chorosov. "You know all about nature and you love it, but you don't trust it."

"But you yourself, Grigory Ivanovich, how do you explain that red fire on the cliff, the blueish-green columns and the shining cloud?"

"The explanation's simple—mountain spirits," Chorosov replied calmly.

I turned quickly towards him but I could see no shade of a smile on his expressionless face.

"I'm not joking. You think the lake got its name because of its unearthly beauty? No, it's beautiful all right, but it's got a bad name. Look at me, for instance—I painted a picture, but I barely managed to get away. I was there in 1909 and I was a sick man for four years after. . . ."

I asked the artist to tell me the legends surrounding the lake.

"Very well," said Chorosov. "Come and sit down."

We seated ourselves on a broad divan covered with a rough blue and yellow Mongolian carpet.

"The beauty of that spot," Chorosov began, "has drawn people for a long time, but some mysterious force often caused the death of those who approached the lake. I myself felt its fatal influence, but of that later. One interesting thing is that the lake is more beautiful on warm summer days than at any other time, and it is just on those days that its fatal power operates the more strongly. As soon as people who came to the lake saw the blood-red light on the cliff, and the flickering blueish-green transparent columns, they began to feel strange. . . The snow peaks about them seemed to sink onto their heads, bearing down upon them with an unendurable weight, and the rays of light danced before their eyes. People felt drawn to that place, to the circular cone-shaped mountain, where they seemed to see the shadows of the mountain spirits, but as soon as they reached the spot everything disappeared, and only bare cliffs remained. Choking, drained of strength, barely able to move their legs, crushed in spirit, these unfortunates left the fatal spot. But death usually overtook them on the road. It was only a few strong hunters who once came to the lake that managed with incredible difficulty to make their way to the

nearest tents. Many of them died, others were sick for a long time and lost their strength and daring for ever. From that time Deny-Der has had a bad name, and people have almost ceased to go there. There is neither bird nor beast to be found there, and on the left-hand shore, where the spirits gather, nothing grows—not even grass. . . I heard that legend when I was still a child, and for a long time I longed to visit the realm of the mountain spirits. Twenty years ago I went there and spent two days absolutely alone. The first day I noticed nothing out of the way, and worked for a long time, making study after study. However, that day there were thick clouds racing over the sky, the light changed continually, and I could not catch the transparence of the mountain air. I decided to stop for one day more, spending the night in a wood about 400 metres from the lake. In the evening I felt a slight nausea and there was a queer burning sensation in my mouth which made me spit continually. . . The next day dawned bright, with a promise of glorious weather. I pushed through to the lake with a heavy head, fighting my weakness, but was soon absorbed in my work and forgot all about my malaise. The sun was hot when I finished a study and pushed my easel aside to cast a last glance over the whole lake. I was tired out, my hands were trembling; every now and then my head felt strangely dull and heavy, and everything would go dark before my eyes. And that was when I saw the spirits of the lake. The shadow of a cloud swam over the transparent water. The rays of the sun striking over the surface seemed still brighter after their momentary dimming. And on the further border where light and shadow met I suddenly saw several columns of a ghostly blueish-green, like tremendous human figures swathed in mantles. Sometimes they would stand still, sometimes move swiftly, or again melt into the air. Frozen in amazement, I watched them with a feeling of crushing terror. For some moments more the noiseless spectral dance continued, and then flashes and reflections of blood-red appeared on the cliffs. And over it all hung suspended a mushroom-shaped cloud shining with a faint greenish light. . . Suddenly I felt a flow of strength, my sight seemed sharpened, the distant cliffs seemed to approach close to me, so that I could distinguish every detail of their sheer sides. Seizing my brush, I chose colours with a feverish energy, hastening to bring that amazing sight onto my canvas. A light breeze skimmed the lake, and in an instant cloud the phantoms had disappeared, leaving only the red-hot coals of the cliffs still shining grimly. My sudden feeling of stimulation equally suddenly turned to weakness, my malaise took possession of me—it was as though all my strength had been drained out of the tips of my fingers still holding palette and brush. A premonition of disaster caused me to hasten. I quickly closed the sketchbook and collected my belongings. A terrible weight seemed to be pressing down upon my head, my chest. . . The wind over the lake grew stronger, clouds came down upon the heights and the pure colours of the landscape were dimmed. The spiritual, serene beauty of the lake gave place to a mournful grimness, the crimson gleams where the phantoms had danced were extinguished, and only the dark wild cliffs reared up beneath their patches of snow. My breathing became painful and there was a whistling in my chest when, fighting my weakness and the oppressive weight that lay upon me, I turned my back on the lake. I remember, as though it were some confused dream, making my way to the place where my guides had agreed to await me, having refused to approach the lake itself. The mountains seemed to sway before me, and terrible attacks of vomiting left me completely exhausted. Sometimes I would stumble or collapse, and then it would be a long time before I could find the strength to rise again. How I got to the other lake and my guides, I don't know, and after all it doesn't matter—the main thing is, that the case of sketches strapped to my back was intact.

"'But you will die all the same, Chorosov,' said the old guide in the tone of a dispassionate observer, when he saw my condition. 'Spittle is running from your mouth.'

"Well, I didn't die, as you see, but for a long time I felt very ill. A languor and dulled sight made it difficult for me to live and work. The big picture of Deny-Der I painted only a year later, but this one I did little by little, as I got onto my feet again. Through heavy suffering I learned the truth about Lake Deny-Der and the mountain spirits that haunt it. . . ."

Chorosov fell silent, rubbing his wrinkled hands. Through the clear panes of the large windows I could see the illuminated bands of cloud suspended over the mountain tops, while the mists of dusk were settling over the fields below. The artist's story had gripped me strangely. I had no reason to doubt it, but at the same time I could find no explanation for the strange phenomena immortalized in colour on his canvas.

We went into the dining room where the bright lamp on the table dispersed the atmosphere of unreality which the artist's strange story had left. But I was unable to resist enquiring the road to the Lake of Mountain Spirits in case I should ever again chance to be in those parts. "Aha, that lake's taken possession of you!" smiled Chorosov. I took a notebook and pencil from my haversack and prepared to write down the route.

"That spot is in the Katun range, at the eastern end. You know the Argut valley? It's that deep rift between the Chuisk and Katun caps. The bottom is in passable, you have to go along the side. Up the Argut valley, twenty miles from the mouth, the Yuneour stream enters from the right, as you face downstream. You should make a note of that spot, because here the Argut makes a curve and the mouth of the Yunecur is in a broad, flat place. From there you go on up the Argut on its left bank . . . about three miles, and then on your right you'll see a small spring, or stream if you like. It's not very big, but the valley's a wide one and goes deep into the Katun range. That's the valley you must follow. It's dry and there are large, spreading leafy trees. When you get high up, you'll see a high cliff with a small waterfall, and there the valley bends to the right. The bottom of it is broad and firm, and along

it there are five lakes in a chain, one after the other—sometimes at a distance of 400 metres, sometimes half a mile. The last lake, the fifth, where the cliffs narrow, will be Deny-Der. And that's all. Yes, and I've just remembered—a good landmark! At the mouth of the spring, where you'll turn from the Argut, there'll be a small bog. On the edge of it, to the left, there was a huge dead tree without any twigs, forked at the top, like the devil's pitchfork. . . ."

I wrote down Chorosov's instructions.

In the morning I examined the artist's work. I remember several delightful studies, but there was nothing to compare with Deny-Der. I did not dare even to hint at the possibility of acquiring it, with my modest means, so I took two sketches of snowy peaks—at dawn and at sunset. Chorosov also made me a present of a small pen and ink sketch of my beloved deciduous trees, a sketch showing a deep knowledge of their nature. As I was leaving, he said:

"I see that you can't take your eyes off Deny-Der. But I can't let you have that. I'll give you one of the sketches made by the lake. Only—" he was silent for a moment—"that'll be after my death—I don't think I can part with it now. . . Don't be disappointed, I suppose it won't be long. . . It will be sent to you," the artist added seriously, with his characteristic embarrassingly phlegmatic manner. Wishing Chorosov a long life, and expressing the hope that we might meet again soon, I mounted my horse, and fate as it turned out, made our parting final.

It was a long time before I found myself in the Altai again. Four years passed in hard work, and in the fifth I was temporarily out of action. A bad attack of rheumatism, that scourge of travellers in the taiga, put me on my back for six months, and after that I had trouble with my heart.

I fled from the idleness and boredom of southern seas to my grey but beloved Leningrad. There, my chiefs offered me a job connected with the Sefidkan mercury beds in Central Asia. In the sunbaked deserts of Turkestan I hoped finally to overcome my sickness and return to the melancholy wildness of the north that held me captive.

In my love for the north I was most boringly single-hearted, and deprived of the possibility of plunging into the solitary open spaces, I was continually fighting my wild fits of longing for Siberia.

One evening when I was sitting at home over my microscope, a parcel was brought to me which grieved rather than gladdened me. In a flat box of smooth cedar-wood lay the study of Deny-Der, a sign that the artist Chorosov had ended his earthly labours. The sight of the Lake of Mountain Spirits at once recalled to me all the details of Chorosov's story, and the distant, unattainable beauty of Deny-Der made me feel both agitated and sad. In an attempt to distract myself with work, I placed a new polished specimen of Sefidkan ore-bearing rock on the microscope slide. With accustomed movements I lowered the tube, adjusted the focus and plunged into a study of the sequence of crystallization in mercury ore. The polished plate was of almost pure cinnabar, and I could not study it very well. The fine shades of colour reflected from the plate were concealed by the electric light. I changed the Silverman opaque light for an oblique lighting and switched on the daylight lamp—a grand invention, replacing the sun in the narrow world of the microscope. . . The study of the Lake of Mountain Spirits was still before my mind's eye, so that at first I was not even surprised when I saw in the microscope the blood-red reflections on a background of blueish steel, which had so amazed me in Chorosov's picture. But after a second or two I realized that it was not the picture I was looking at, but the inner reflections of mercury ore. I moved the slide, and the blood-red reflections winked, disappeared or changed to a deeper brownish-red, while the greater part of the surface still remained a cold steely hue. Excited, with a dim premonition of being on the threshold of an astounding discovery, I turned the rays of the daylight lamp onto the study of the Lake of Mountain Spirits and saw on the cliffs at the foot of the cone-shaped mountain exactly the same colourings that I had just observed under the microscope. I hastily seized the heavy Schneiderchen tables and there I saw the colours with the formulas . . . well, there's no good giving all the formulas here. I'll only say that a table of colours has been made out for mineralography, giving the finest shades of all colourings, of which there are about 700. Each shade has its own meaning, and the sum of these shades gives the formula of the mineral. And here it turned out that the shades Chorosov had shown in his picture of the home of the mountain spirits, according to the Schneiderchen table, were exactly the same shades of crimson in the various conditions of lighting, angle of rays and all the other complicated play of light which science calls "interference" of light waves. And in a flash, the secret of Lake Deny-Der was no longer a secret for me. I felt an involuntary amazement that such a solution had not occurred to me at the time, there in the Altai mountains.

I telephoned for a taxi and soon arrived at the enclosure in which twinkled the large windows of the chemical laboratory. My friend, a chemist and metallurgist, was still there.

"Ah, here's the Siberian bear!" he greeted me. "What's your trouble? Another rush analysis?"

"No, Dmitri Mikhailovich, I've come to you for information. What can you tell me about mercury?"

"Mercury? Enough to fill several large books!"

"Mercury boils at a heat of 70°, but at what temperature does it evaporate?"

"At any, my dear engineer, with the exception of hard frost."

"So it's volatile."

"Amazingly volatile for its specific gravity."

"One more question: have mercury fumes colourings, and if so—what?"

"They themselves are colourless, but at times, in a strong concentration of rays, they have blueish-green shadings. When there's an

electric discharge in rarified air, they take on a greenish-white colour. . . ."

"Then it's clear! Many thanks, my dear chap!"

"Here, stop a bit, where are you off? What's all this about, anyway?" cried the chemist, trying to stop me, but I dashed off without explaining.

Five minutes later, my taxi discharged me at my doctor's door. The good old man came out into the entry, looking rather alarmed.

"What's happened—the heart giving you trouble again?"

"No, everything's all right! I just came in for a moment. Tell me, what are the main symptoms of poisoning from mercury fumes?"

"H'm, from mercury—a flow of saliva, nausea and vomiting, but from mercury fumes—I'll just look. Come in and sit down."

"No, if you don't mind, I only dropped in for a moment. Could you find out quickly, Pavel Nikolayevich?"

The old man went into his study, and a moment later emerged, holding an open book.

"Here you see, mercury fumes—the lowering of blood pressure, acute mental excitement, quickened, uneven breathing, and later on, death from paralysis of the heart. . . ."

"That's splendid!" I cried involuntarily.

"What's splendid?" asked the surprised doctor. "Death?"

Now I was sure that all my conjectures were completely justified. As soon as I arrived home, I rang up my chiefs and told them that our work demanded that I go immediately to the Altai. I asked them to allow Krasulin to accompany me—he was a young fellow working for his diploma, sensible and physically strong—a very necessary consideration in view of my still poor health.

At the end of May it was possible to reach the lake without hindrance, and it was just at that time when Krasulin and I arrived at the village of Inya on the Chuisk tract, accompanied by two workers experienced in the ways of the taiga.

I remembered clearly all the details of the way which Chorosov had told me, and in addition, there was an old, tattered notebook in my pocket—the same one in which I had written down the route as the artist gave it to me.

When my little company set up the tents in the evening at the mouth of the valley opposite the dead fork-like tree, I was seized with excitement at the thought that the next day would decide whether or not my suppositions had been correct. My excitement affected Krasulin, and he came to join me on the hummock where I was sitting, staring thoughtfully at the horned tree.

"Vladimir Evgenyevich," he began softly. "Do you remember that you promised to tell me the object of our journey as soon as we got into the mountains. . . ."

"Borya," I answered, "I hope to discover, and no later than tomorrow, a large source of mercury—it may be, even virgin ore. Tomorrow we shall see whether I'm right or not. You know," I continued, "that mercury is usually found scattered, in small concentrations. There's only one known ore bed with a rich mercury content in the world—and that's—"

"Almaden in Spain," Krasulin caught me up.

"Yes, for centuries now Almaden has been supplying half the world with mercury. Once, even a tiny lake of pure mercury was found there. Right up to the present, drops of mercury ooze into the Almaden mines. Well, I expect to find something of the same kind here... That there are whole ravines there consisting almost entirely of cinnobar of that I'm certain, if only. . . ."

"But Vladimir Evgenyevich, if we discover such beds—it'll be a revolution in the whole economfcs oi mercury!"

"Of course, my dear fellow! Mercury's a most important metal for medicine and war. Well, it's time for bed now. Tomorrow we've got to be up before dawn. I think it's going to be a dull day, and that's just what we need."

"But why's that so important?" asked Krasulin.

"Because I don't want to poison you all, not to mention myself. Mercury fumes are no joke. . . There's no doubt that the secret of that mercury's been kept through the centuries just because of the fatal character of the fumes. Tomorrow we're going to wrestle with the mountain spirits, and then we shall see what we shall see. . . ."

A faint rosy mist hung over the mountain sides; in the valleys dusk was already falling, and only the lofty snowy caps still shone in the rays of a sun now invisible. Then they too dimmed. I sat smoking by the campfire for a long time, but in the end I mastered my excitement and lay down to sleep.

The next day, for some reason, I recall in fragments.

I have a vivid memory of the broad, absolutely flat bottom of the valley between the third and fourth lakes. In the centre was a smooth green carpet of mossy swamp without a single tree to break it, it was only on the borders of the valley that the tall cedars appeared. Leafless on one side, they seemed to be extending their mighty boughs towards the Lake of Mountain Spirits, like huge dark flags on tall flagstaffs. Low, frowning clouds raced swiftly over them.

The fourth lake was a small, round one with sharp stones jutting out from the grey-blue rippling surface. After crossing them, we found ourselves on shale thick with cedars, and ten minutes later I stood on the shore of the Lake of Mountain Spirits.

A dull, ashen light lay upon the water and the snowy sides of the mountain range, but nevertheless, I at once recognized the cathedral of the Mountain Spirits which had so seized on my imagination in Chorosov's studio several years previously,

It was no easy matter to make our way to the steely cliffs at the foot of the cone-shaped mountain, but all difficulties were forgotten the moment our geological hammer with ringing strokes struck out the first piece of cinnobar from a rib of the ravine. The further cliffs fell in slanting steps to a small hollow over which a light mist hung. The hollow was filled with hot, muddy-looking water. Hot springs sprang up from deep rifts around it, sending up a curtain of mist on the sides of the hollow.

I left Krasulin to make a rough sketch of the ore-bearing area, while I myself led the men through the mist to the foot of the mountain.

"What's that?" one of them asked suddenly. I glanced in the direction he indicated. There, half hidden by the boulders, was the dim, sinister gleam of a mercury lake . . . my dream come true. The surface seemed to bulge. With inexpressible excitement I stooped over it, and plunging my hands into the slippery, inadhesive liquid, I thought with a beating heart of the several thousand tons of liquid metal—my gift to my country. Krasulin came running up on hearing my shout, and stood rooted to the spot in speechless delight. But it was necessary to cut our raptures short and urge on our companions to complete the necessary work as quickly as might be. Our heads were already becoming heavy, and there was a burning sensation in our mouths—the ominous signs of mercury poisoning. I snapped my camera right and left, one of the men filled containers with mercury from the lake, while Krasulin and the others hastily measured the ore-bed and the lake. It seemed as though everything was completed with lightning speed, but nevertheless, on the way back we dragged ourselves along slowly, wearily, fighting a vague depression and fear. While we were rounding the left bank of the lake, the clouds parted and we were able to see the serrated diamonds of the peaks. Slanting rays of sunshine cut through the entrance to the further ravine, and the whole lake valley was filled with shining, transparent light. Turning, I saw the blueish-green phantoms wavering over the spot we had just quitted, and gave the order to run. Luckily, the shore levelled off, and we soon came to where we had left our horses.

"Gallop, lads!" I cried, as I turned my horse, and casting a last look behind me at Deny-Der, carried away in my memory the dance of the spirits around the greenish cloud. . . .

That same day we went down the valley to the second lake. The feeling of oppression had not passed, and that night we all felt more or less ill, but in general everything passed off well.

Then telegrams began flying to the centre and back again came instructions to organize the investigation of Deny-Der, taking all precautions against the danger involved.

The enchanted lake gave and is still giving the Soviet Union a quantity of mercury that immediately made us independent of other countries.

But I have always cherished the grateful memory of that fearless searcher after the mountain spirits, whose fine and exact representation opened up the riches of the Lake of Mountain Spirits—of the artist Chorosov.